



WHAT NAVAL PARENTS SAY

Supporting Wee Ones:

A Toolkit for Early Years
Practitioners Working with
Armed Forces Families

**WEE
PEOPLE,
BIG
FEELINGS**
HELENSBURGH



Ministry
of Defence

**THE ARMED FORCES
COVENANT FUND TRUST**
Funded by HM Government



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starcatchers.org.uk

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ABOUT STARCATCHERS



Starcatchers is Scotland's Arts and Early Years organisation. We believe that our youngest children, those aged birth-to-five, should be able to fulfil their rights under the UNCRC through access to arts and creative experiences that give inspiration, joy and wonder to early childhood in Scotland. Our mission is to inspire babies, toddlers and young children by including them in high quality live performances and creative experiences that fulfil their right to access a rich arts and cultural life in Scotland regardless of where they live or their background.

The Wee People, Big Feelings approach

"Every forces family is different, and every deployment is different: sometimes we cope well with the transitions, and sometimes it can bring a lot of challenges. There's no one size fits all approach, its important we develop a repertoire of techniques to support wee ones and their families."

Early Years Practitioner and Forces Family member

Wee People,
Big Feelings has been
developed to support
forces families with
wee ones aged 2-5
years old



The Armed Forces
Covenant Fund Trust has
now funded Argyll and Bute
Council and Starcatchers to
bring Wee People, Big
Feelings to nurseries in
Helensburgh and the
surrounding areas
in 2024-2026



In 2022 Starcatchers
worked with the Ministry of
Defence and Scots Corner
Early Learning and
Childcare Centre to develop
creative ideas and resources
that helped wee ones
develop emotional
literacy skills



Wee People,
Big Feelings gives little
ones opportunities to develop
emotional literacy skills every
day – they tune into their
bodies, and learn to recognise
different emotions by
“practicing” them through
imaginative play and self
expression.



**THIS RESOURCE
WAS CREATED ENTIRELY
THROUGH CONVERSATIONS WITH
NAVAL FAMILIES IN HELENSBURGH
— MOSTLY WITH NON-DEPLOYED
PARENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER FIVE.
THEIR VOICES ILLUMINATE THE
EMOTIONAL REALITY BEHIND MILITARY
LIFE FOR THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN,
WHO LIVE VERY MUCH
IN THE MOMENT.**



SUPPORTING WEE ONES

This toolkit is for Early Years practitioners who are supporting children from Armed Forces families.

Whether you're aware of their family's service background or not, the emotional landscape these children navigate can be deeply affected by the unpredictability of military life – deployments, returns, long shifts, and difficult transitions.



All families have a range of needs, for which they can seek help, whether from statutory services or their own support networks. Families of military personnel are no different, but the demands placed on those who serve can make family life more complex.

The voices of wee ones have shaped the creative output of Starcatchers' **Wee People, Big Feelings Helensburgh** project and future resources will explore this further. The voices of the children in this toolkit are interpreted through the perspectives of their parents and carers – the people who know them best.

What you'll find in this resource...

- Child-led activities for exploring and expressing their big feelings
- Artistic strategies to support children's emotional wellbeing
- Real-life experiences to develop your understanding
- Questions and prompts to guide conversations with families
- Creative prompts for staff reflection

SCAN ME



Find out more about
**Wee People, Big
Feelings Helensburgh**

UNDERSTANDING FORCES FAMILIES

Just because you've met one forces family, it doesn't mean you know what everyone goes through – there's so many factors in terms of what people experience.

Families in the Armed Forces live with constant transition, uncertainty, and emotional upheaval. Some may talk openly; others might not mention deployment at all – sometimes they can't.

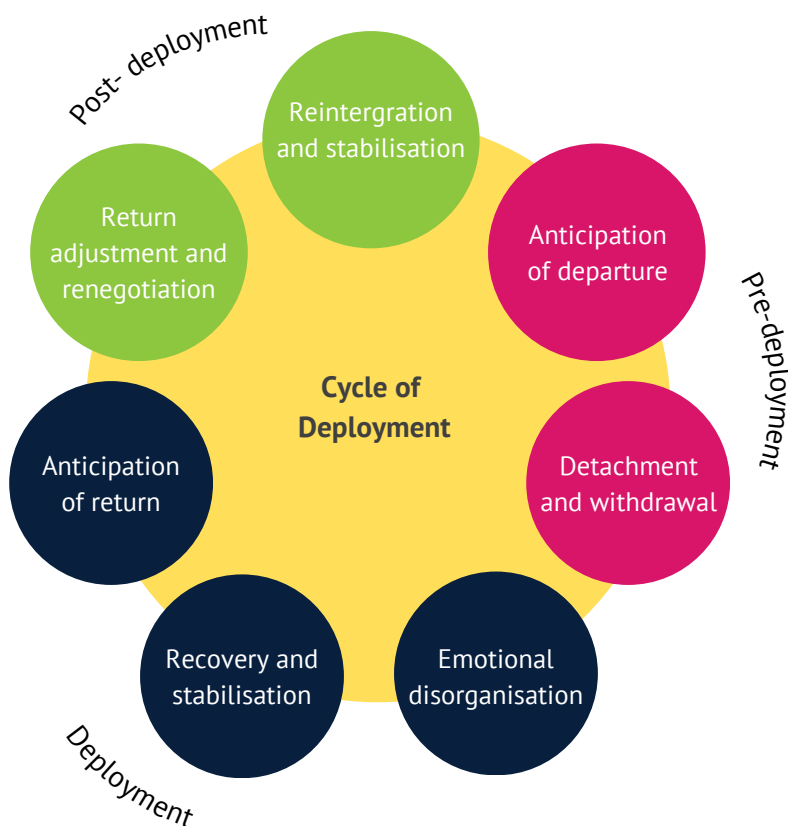
It's vital to build trust over time. Ask gently, listen carefully. Every family's needs will differ.



Reflective Question

How might you build trust with a family whose home life you know little about?

Emotional Cycle of Deployment



“Every forces family is different, and every deployment is different: sometimes we cope well with the transitions, and sometimes it can bring a lot of challenges. There's no one size fits all approach, its important we develop a repertoire of techniques to support wee ones and their families.”

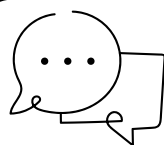
Early Years Practitioner and Forces Family member

KEY THEMES

to understand

Through our conversations with forces families, we identified patterns and recurring themes in their reflections and in the stories they shared. Here we look at three commonalities and how each of these areas can create barriers to connection and understanding.

1



Misconceptions and Assumptions

2



Types of separation

3



Uncertainty

1

Misconceptions and Assumptions

“Some people have this attitude ‘forces families get everything’ but we really don’t. The support varies so much from base to base – it can be a really isolating experience.”

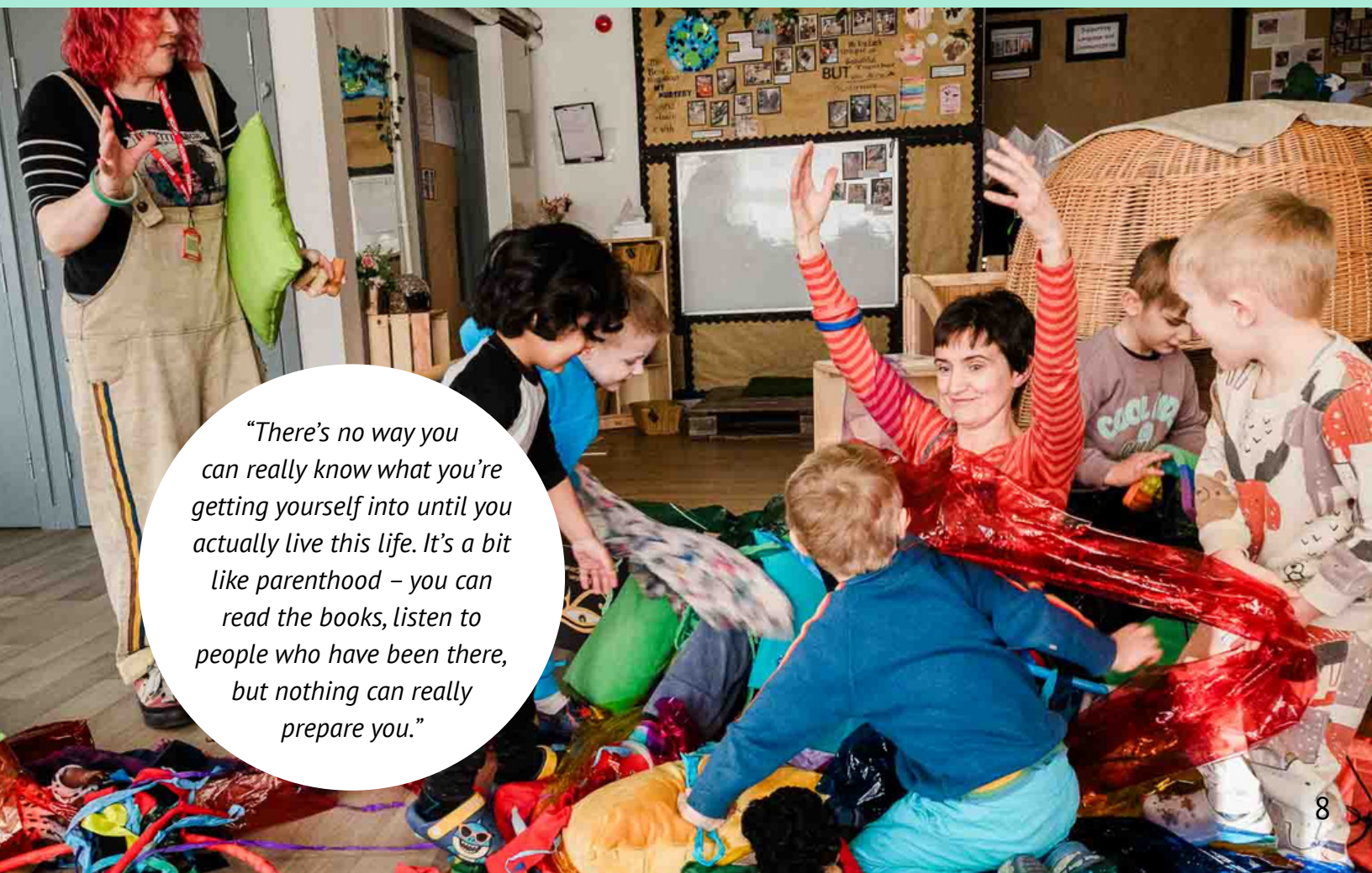
Forces families are very often subject to misconceptions and assumptions - in fact, the families we spoke to said it is this stigma that can stop them from sharing they are a forces family in the first place. From the outside, it can seem like they “get everything,” for example, housing. But the reality is far more complex. The families tell us there is no uniform standard of care or help, and they often navigate the emotional and logistical challenges largely on their own. The common narrative that families “chose this life” overlooks a fundamental truth: the children didn’t.

“Yes, to some extent we chose this – but our children didn’t. It’s important we find ways to support them.”

“I met my husband before he joined up. I don’t know many folk who meet someone when they’re young and think what childcare and support will we need years down the line?”

“Most people sign up to the forces when they’re young, at the time they’re not thinking about having a family and what it will be like for their wee ones.”

“There’s no way you can really know what you’re getting yourself into until you actually live this life. It’s a bit like parenthood – you can read the books, listen to people who have been there, but nothing can really prepare you.”



Family roles, not gender roles

Another common assumption is that the deployed parent is the dad – but that's not always the case.

What happens when the roles are reversed?

Many of the stay-at-home parents describe themselves as their children's "emotional anchor," providing the consistency their little ones need to regulate their emotions during a deployment. For many of the families, this is mum's role. But if mum is the one who is deployed, how does that shift affect the parent at home, and the children?

The Naval families discussed the role of the primary caregiver, and the difference it made when Mum was the one being deployed:

Navy wife: *"I feel like its not so bad for my wee ones because I'm the one they come to if they're upset and stuff – it's great when their Dad is home, but they're really focussed on having fun, you know being the fun Dad...which you know, leaves me with all the difficult stuff, which isn't easy on me, but it means they still have the emotional support when Dad deploys."*

Deployed Mum: *"That's what makes it so hard for me, because I'm that person for (my son) – so when I'm away it's really hard. I don't think there's enough support or flexibility when it's Mum who deploys – they don't take anything into account in terms of how your family life is impacted."*

Reflective Question



How can we support stay-at-home parents to be their children's emotional anchor?



2 Types of Separation

Whether it's a longer posting, shift-work, or working away for a week, separation affects routines, relationships, and a child's sense of safety. Once deployed, communication is sparse and unpredictable. Families may be limited to brief, restrictive messages with no guarantee of a reply; for young children, the lack of contact is hard to understand. Even homecomings aren't simple. A joyful reunion can give way to the reality of demanding work schedules, with some loved ones returning to long shifts at the base the very next day. Here we look at examples from families to shape a better understanding of the challenges they face.



a) Submarine Deployments

A-Boats

-  **Unpredictable:** families find it difficult to prepare for deployment due to the frequency of departure dates changing
-  **Limited interaction:** once deployed communication is limited and unreliable

"We are allowed to tell people a deployment is coming up so we try and let the nursery know, but nothing is ever set in stone."



"We can't prepare or count down to them leaving because the goalposts move all the time – they'll be back and forth to the base thinking they're leaving, but then something gets cancelled or delayed and they just end up back and forth for weeks. As a family, your feelings are up and down and all over the place. By the time they actually deploy it can be a bit of a relief but even with that, then you feel guilty for feeling like that."

"We get some communication while they're deployed, but it's not guaranteed, and we can't predict when it will be. Sometimes the comms work and sometimes they don't, which is hard for the wee kids to understand."



"They can be away for months, they come back, you do a big welcome home – but then they need to go back into work at the base the next day. It can be an emotional rollercoaster for the wee ones – they're so happy to see their Dad after months apart, and they can't understand why he disappears again so soon. They can be working ten, twelve hour shifts too, so even when they're home they're knackered and don't have a lot of family time."

V-Boats

Classified: it is not possible for families to share deployment dates

🚫 **Unpredictable:** departure dates change frequently

🕒 **Zero interaction:** once deployed, there is limited communication and families will not hear from their loved ones for months. Communication is limiting and restrictive.

"We can send them 60 words. His side of the family gets 60 words too, so if they don't want to send a message then we get 120 words, to share between us. We can't share good news or bad news, and we don't get anything back."

"We live two lives – one when he's away and one when he's back. Some people really struggle with having no contact for months on end, but in some ways for me it's easier – once he's gone, he's gone, and I just get on with it."



"We can say goodbye hundreds of times – you say a tearful goodbye not expecting to see them or hear from them for months, but then sometimes they're back home for dinner the same day because plans have changed. It can drag on for weeks, sometimes even two or three months – it's emotionally exhausting, and you just can't prepare for it."

b) Marines



Unpredictable: Deployments can be anywhere in the world, and they're at a moment's notice



Communication: Although unreliable, some communication is available.

Usually away for three months, when the comms are working we can get video calls. Sometimes the kids really like it, and sometimes it's upsetting because it's a reminder they're not with us.

Reflective Question



1. What behaviours might you notice if a child in your setting was feeling the strain of separation?
2. How might routines or behaviours change when a parent returns?

c) Weekenders



Although from the outside, the idea of regular time at home can seem ideal, there are many challenges and obstacles facing service members who work away during the week.

Constant transition: Shifts are subject to constant change resulting in difficulty planning travel and financial strain on families when booking fares.

Unreliability: Return travel is unreliable and individuals are expected to arrange this travel for themselves. These disruptions can sometimes leave families with no other option other than to miss their weekend at home.

Work/life balance: The uncertainty around return travel and the distances to make it home can put a strain on both parents. The deployed parent may have to face a huge journey home, while the stay at home parent is emotionally exhausted with the constant demands of family life.

In theory its better, they're working away during the week but they're home at weekends, but they can be posted at the other end of the country and they need to make their own way back. Sometimes that means they're driving through the night and getting home absolutely knackered – the kids want to see them but their Dad needs a break, but then I need a break too.

I try to get all the boring stuff done during the week so we can enjoy time together as a family when he's home, but I'm working full time too – when I'm doing everything, when do my kids have quality time with me?

If you're lower down the ranks and on quite low pay, trying to travel back every weekend can put a big financial strain on the family.

Schedules change at the last minute – it makes it hard to book travel, and hard to make plans.

When he's posted in (city) he's relying on low cost airlines to get him home, but they're notoriously unreliable and flights get cancelled all the time. Sometimes as a family we need to make the decision whether its worth all the disruption and uncertainty for just a few hours together.



d) Base Working



Long hours: Living on or close to the base can result in last minute shifts, long hours and little to no flexibility in your working hours depending on your role.

Disrupted routines: Base workers are close enough to be called in last minute and for very long shifts, impacting on time with their families.

No work/life balance: Varies hugely depending on the role you have and whether you can keep your family time protected.



"We live closer to the base which you think would give us more family time, but it can actually result in less time together because the closer you live, the more likely you'll be called in last minute to cover. But its swings and roundabouts, because if we lived a couple of hours away the travel back and forth would mean he misses bedtime anyway."



"The work/life balance while you're working on base can vary massively depending on your role too ... It's so important to talk to families and find out their personal circumstances, because it all varies so much."

"In our experience, the further up the ranks you go, the easier it is to protect family time when you're at home and working on the base. The younger ones are more likely to be called in at the last minute, or put on 12 or 24 hour shifts. Even when they're "home" there are a lot of missed bedtimes, it can be hard to stick to a routine, and depending on the shifts the wee ones can go days without seeing the parent who's serving."

"They often start working longer and longer hours in the run up to a deployment, so the kids are already missing them before they've even gone anywhere. Then there's the uncertainty about when they'll actually go – the plans are messed around so much, mentally they're not with the family."



"We say goodbye hundreds of times before they actually leave. It's emotionally exhausting."

3 Uncertainty

With so many unknowns and variables in the lives and experiences of Forces Families, supporting little ones through these transitions can be challenging. As we know, even everyday transitions can be difficult to navigate for young children, and the supports put in place need to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances.

For families of deployed service members, life can be a cycle of uncertainty and emotional upheaval. In the lead-up to deployment plans can shift, and families find themselves saying goodbye over and over again. This takes a heavy emotional toll. The secrecy surrounding deployments adds to the strain - some families are unable to inform their children's nursery until after their loved one has left.

Often it has to be about **helping wee ones express their disappointment and hurt** because we can't put measures in to mitigate it.



Reflective Challenge

Think of something in your own life that required emotional juggling – it's not the same, but what might help you relate to families living with uncertainty?

CREATIVE TOOLS FAMILIES USE – AND YOU CAN TOO



"We doused the doll in his Dad's aftershave – I mean properly soaked it, we even cut open one of the seams to get the smell right in there and sewed it back up. Years later it still smells of him – we can hug it every time he misses his Dad."

Sweetie Jar

Fill a jar with a sweet for each day the parent is away – helps with understanding time

Deployment Dolls

Dolls sprayed with parent's aftershave provide comfort and connection



Picture Timeline

Weekly photo from deployment creates visual reassurance that time is passing

"We have a party in the house once a month while they're away, it cheers us up and feels more positive – like we're celebrating something we've achieved rather than deployment just being a sad thing."

Memory Letters

Write letters to be read by the parent on return – validates connection during separation

Monthly Mini-Parties

Celebrating "making it through another month" adds joy and reframes absence

Photos & Cuddles

A moment to sit with a photo, talk, and reassure the child their parent will return

"Sometimes I can see my wee one get a bit wound up – he'll be getting frustrated or angry or a bit teary – and we'll just sit down and look at photos of his Dad, have a cuddle and a chat."

Deployment Map

Use a picture map with hidden images behind "doors" to explain travel in child-friendly ways

"I'll always emphasise that he will be back, but when they're wee it's hard for them to get their heads around the passage of time."

"We used to try having going away parties but it was a strange mix of emotions for my son, he found it quite upsetting. So now we try and make deployment as normal as possible – emphasise that he is coming back."

CREATIVE TOOLS BABIES SHOWED US DURING STARCATCHERS SESSIONS

Story Boxes

Children used everyday objects to create characters, worlds and adventures.

"Making and decorating spaces in small friendship groups supported bonding between children. After the session we discovered parts of cardboard tunnels, not visible from the outside, that had been carefully decorated. One setting requested we leave the builds intact or reinforce some that had started to come apart. They wanted the children to come back and engage with the mini worlds created."

Starcatchers' Artist

Colour and mark-making

Chalk and art materials became ways of expressing excitement, love and belonging.

"Outwith the outline of possible outcomes we got the chance to welcome children who do not normally interact with more linear art activities. One child discovered in crossing over the paper that the chalk dust took on the pattern of the sole of her shoe and she repeated the action creating a patterned area at the top end of the paper. Another boy spent quite a bit of time using crepe paper rolls rolling it out in a line to the corner of the room where he piled the remaining paper into a nest structure and then put some of the egg shaped chinks in it. He was fully focused on the process of creating the safe space and one of the practitioners commented on how neither of these children usually respond to the visual art activities."

Starcatchers' Artist

Travelling hoops

Hoops became boats, portals and vehicles for imaginative journeys.

"The Creative Champions brought artistic offers into the play, placing themselves as available to adorn or be changed through creating costume. There was a skirt made from hoop and tape and another hoop which became a boat. The colours enabled imaginative role-play such as a child who had covered themselves in green of many kinds and said, "I want to be a green monster and scare my mum – she won't even smell me coming"."

Starcatchers' Artist

Puppet friends

Simple materials became companions to explore feelings and relationships.

"An example of exploring relationship through scrap puppetry was when a child asked Charlotte to be the 'daddy' for the puppet monster they had created. This led to a repeated story of the wee one going away with the 'baby' monster and Daddy having to find them, with lots of happiness and hugs when he did."

Starcatchers' Artist

Protecting tiny creatures

Children repeatedly cared for vulnerable characters, demonstrating empathy and compassion.

"A lot of care was expressed towards the pompom creatures and people that were created, some children made gifts for their friends and another created a pompom version of each family member."

Starcatchers' Artist

HOW TO START CONVERSATIONS WITH FAMILIES

You might not know a family is connected to the Forces. They may not always feel able to share when deployment is happening or they may be bound by confidentiality. Through our conversations with families, we know that by asking open, respectful questions you can start to make connections and create a safe space for a little one to explore their feelings.

And remember...

Every family is unique

You may not know the family is a Forces Family

Trust can be built up with families over time



Sample Questions

1. *We're exploring ways to better support families connected to the Forces – would you like to share anything about your child's experience?*
2. *Have you found something that helps your wee one feel secure when routines change?*
3. *Is there anything coming up we could help your child prepare for?*

Reflective Questions

- How does the family want you to support their little one?
- Do they have tried and tested ways of helping their children feel secure while their parent is away?



Creative Reflection Challenge for Practitioners

Write 60–120 words about your week.

Follow these rules:

- No names or specific identifiers
- One moment that was challenging
- One moment that made you smile
- One small hope for next week

Many of the families we spoke to have experience of this type of communication with their partners during deployment. Attempting these short texts can increase empathy and help you connect to the feelings of living with unpredictable change.

Closing Thoughts: *Connection, Not Perfection*

There is no single roadmap through the emotional terrain of Armed Forces family life. Transitions will never be tidy or predictable, and support doesn't have to be perfect. Your role is not to provide answers but to offer:

- A steady presence
- Creative outlets for emotions
- An ear that listens
- A safe space to explore feelings

Helpful Resources and Links

Naval Families Federation Links

Making Sense of the Emotional Cycle of Deployment



A pull-out and keep resource for schools, and parents/cares



Starcatchers Links

Wee People, Big Feelings Practical Guide



Wee People, Big Feelings Creative Flow video series



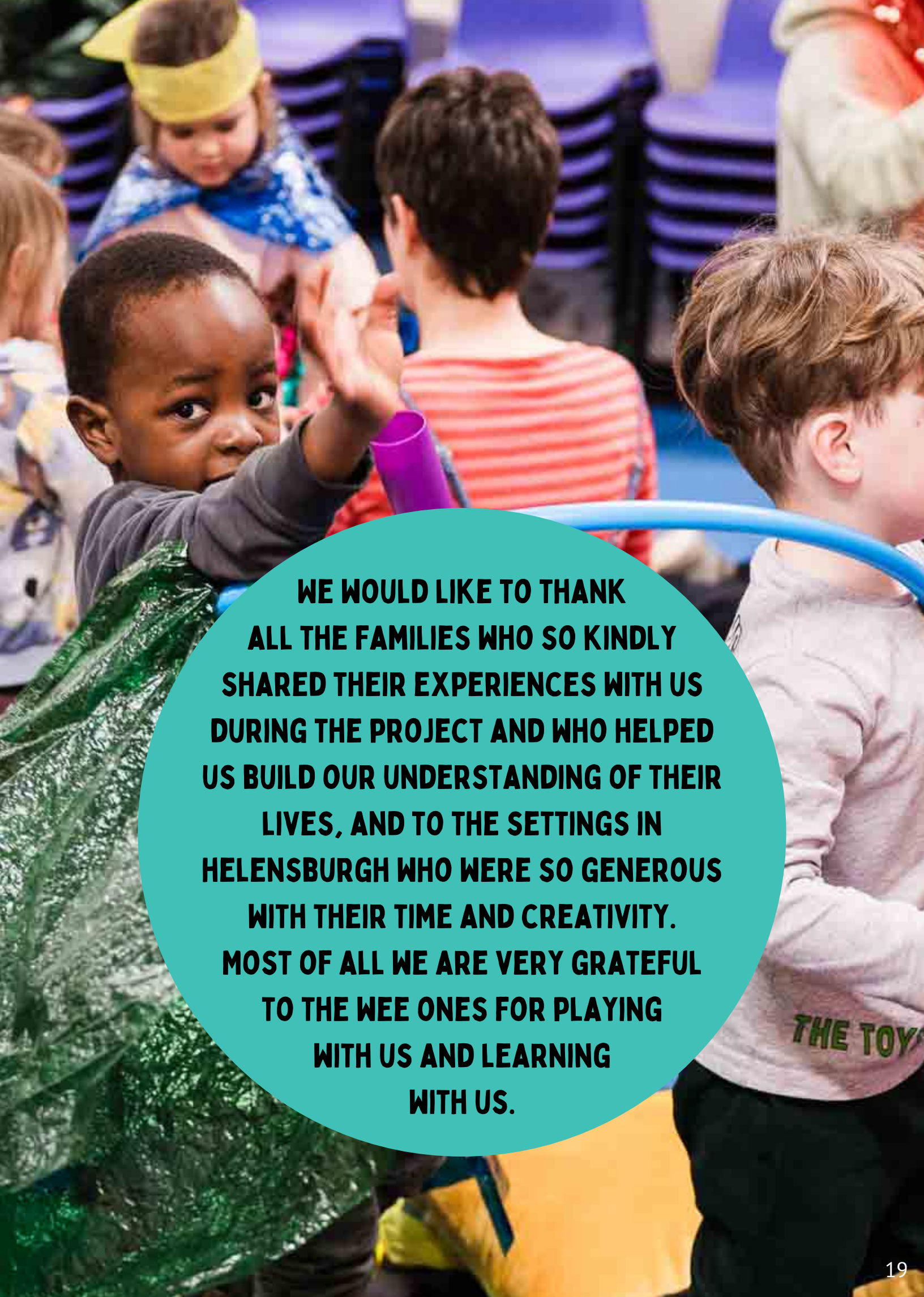
Wee People, Big Feelings Pathways into Play video series



Wee People, Big Feelings Wee Inspirations video series



"Sometimes we can't protect our children from hurt – but we can sit with them through it, and show them they're not alone."

A group of children are playing in a colorful room. In the foreground, a young boy with dark skin and short hair is looking towards the camera, holding a purple tube. To his right, a boy with light skin and brown hair is holding a blue hula hoop. In the background, a girl with dark skin and a yellow headband is visible. The room has blue walls and a yellow floor. A large teal circle is overlaid on the image, containing white text.

**WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK
ALL THE FAMILIES WHO SO KINDLY
SHARED THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH US
DURING THE PROJECT AND WHO HELPED
US BUILD OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR
LIVES, AND TO THE SETTINGS IN
HELENSBURGH WHO WERE SO GENEROUS
WITH THEIR TIME AND CREATIVITY.
MOST OF ALL WE ARE VERY GRATEFUL
TO THE WEE ONES FOR PLAYING
WITH US AND LEARNING
WITH US.**



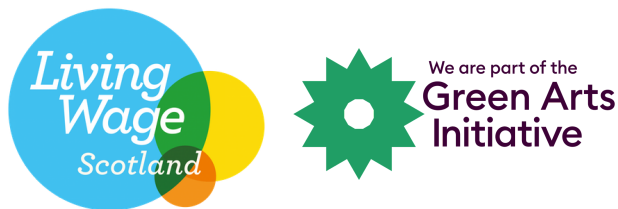
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